the cinema of DAVID LYNCH

american dreams, nightmare visions

edited by

erica sheen & annette davison

CHAPTER ONE

The Essential Evil in/of Eraserhead (or, Lynch to the Contrary)

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> I like things that go into hidden, mysterious places, places I want to explore that are very disturbing. *In that disturbing thing, there is sometimes tremendous poetry and truth*. (Lynch in Jerome 1990: 82 [my emphasis])

For various reasons, and in various ways, commentators on *Eraserhead* – David Lynch's first feature-length production, released in 1977 – have attempted to mitigate the film's cynicism and nightmarish qualities. It is as if they feel (but refuse to admit) that the picture cannot be celebrated as a work of brilliance unless its manifest horror is somehow redeemed. However, such a redemptive impulse, perpetuated by the director himself in published interviews, actually serves to render this already challenging text *less*, rather than more, coherent. In fact, *Eraserhead* offers little if any hope of salvation, liberation or deliverance from evil; even those characters and scenes typically held up as beacons in the midst of the film's literal and metaphorical darkness (for example, The Lady in the Radiator, Henry's 'mercy killing' of his diseased infant, his tryst with the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall) are *themselves* sources of disgust, loathing and fear. In what follows, I will attempt to show how *Eraserhead* relies upon formal and thematic techniques familiar within the horror genre in order to engender its uncanny effects. To the extent that this analysis contradicts statements made by others, including Lynch himself, concerning the film's romantic,

cathartic, even comedic dimensions, it will stand as a useful corrective to the naïve version of auteurism which so often accompanies the director's work. By contextualising *Eraserhead*, highlighting its debt to generic horror conventions both traditional and modern, the conception (including the *self*-conception) of Lynch as an eccentric *artiste* working in a cinematic vacuum may be somewhat damaged, though not his status as an innovative, immensely talented film-maker.

The Primacy of the Image in Eraserhead

Eraserhead's unconventional plot, post-industrial wasteland setting and imagery which seems to have been extracted from the subconscious mind of a neurotic nebbish has drawn comparisons to the expressionist *mise-en-scène* of Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), the futuristic urban decay of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and the absurdist/surrealist dreamscape of Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) – and all with some justification, despite Lynch's repeated insistence that these films were not direct influences and that, for example, it was not until much later that he even saw the last one on this list.[1]

Although most critics and commentators begin their discussions of *Eraserhead* by noting that the question 'What is this film *about*?' is misplaced, if not wholly irrelevant, they typically proceed to argue that 'despite its gaps and incoherences, *Eraserhead* is a narrative film with a dialogue, a hero and a linear story' (Chion 1995: 41);[2] and that the best way to analyse *Eraserhead* is to decipher the ways in which its meaning 'falls out' from its storyline. So, for example, Cynthia Freeland writes that *Eraserhead* is 'in part "about" cycles of life and death, meaning and meaningless – where death and meaningless are real contenders in the struggle' (Freeland 2000: 232), those quotation marks around the word 'about' signifying the author's reluctance to make even a qualified statement of this sort. K. George Godwin, meanwhile, in a lengthy *Cinefantastique* article, concludes that *Eraserhead* is primarily concerned with dramatising 'the self-defeating tensions which result from man's inability to reconcile his intellect with other, equally potent aspects of his nature' (Godwin 1984: 54).

The first of the above two arguments is difficult to deny, considering the film's bizarre prologue and corresponding epilogue involving the so-called 'Man in the Planet' (Jack Fisk), the fashioning of Henry Spencer (Jack Nance) as more-or-less sympathetic protagonist, and the admittedly loose cause-and-effect relationship holding between various events in the plot. But the second one (less an argument than a critical tendency or unacknowledged strategy), is extremely problematic. For it fails to appreciate the extent to which Lynch – whose earlier shorts (*Six Figures* (1966), *The Alphabet* (1968), *The Grandmother* (1970), *The Amputee* (1974)) make manifest his desire to create 'film paintings' (Lynch in Chion 1995: 10) – asserts the primacy of the audiovisual image in *Eraserhead*; and this *despite* the film's recognisable narrative elements. As Kenneth Kaleta remarks, 'a detailed summary of [the film's] plot actions neither replicates nor illuminates the film. Images from the subconscious are not merely tied to the plot; in *Eraserhead*, images from the sub-

conscious *are* the plot … *Eraserhead* gains its force from presenting images that somehow affect the viewers' (Kaleta 1993: 16). At the very least, rather than it being the case that the film's meaning 'falls out' from its storyline, it is the film's *storyline* which gets determined, or else disrupted, by its *images*.

By way of defending this claim, I shall turn to three methods by which Lynch renders narrative continuity subservient to visual and auditory material. But first, for those who may be completely unfamiliar with *Eraserhead*'s plot, a reasonably straightforward synopsis of events is necessary. The following, courtesy of Lynch biographer Chris Rodley, is as clear and succinct as any:

> In the depths of The Planet, a Man pulls levers. Images implying conception and birth occur. We surface. On arriving home at his strange, squalid apartment in the midst of a desolate industrial landscape, Henry Spencer is told by a neighbour that his girlfriend Mary has invited him for dinner at her parents' home. Once there, he discovers that he has fathered a premature 'baby', which is still at the hospital. Mary moves in with Henry but soon returns to her parents, unable to sleep through the 'baby's' constant crying. Henry fantasises about a lady who appears on a stage inside his radiator. She sings about Heaven, while stamping on strange worm-like creatures. The 'baby' falls ill and, having been seduced by his neighbour, Henry fantasises about being on the radiator stage. His head is pushed off by the 'baby' growing inside him and is taken to a workshop to be processed into pencil-top erasers. Henry finally kills the 'baby', causing a cosmic catastrophe. The Planet explodes, despite the efforts of The Man at its centre, pulling levers in vain. A blinding white flash. Henry meets The Lady in the Radiator in what might be the afterlife. They embrace tenderly. (Rodley 1997: 246–7)

Clear and succinct indeed! The fact is, no mere summation of *Eraserhead*'s narrative, however 'accurate' it may be, can possibly succeed in conveying the *tone* of this picture, the feelings of unease, uncanniness and out-and-out horror which result from watching it and which only increase in intensity upon repeated viewings. At best, descriptive statements of the sort provided by Rodley *et al.* may serve as points of reference in the discussion to follow, which concerns the three methods employed by Lynch in order to assert the primacy of the audio-visual image in *Eraserhead*.

First and most obvious are the inexplicable, surrealistic set-pieces that Lynch spaces out over the course of the picture. These set-pieces – which resemble nothing so much as the miraculous stop-action shorts of Czechoslovakian film-maker/animator/puppeteer Jan Švankmajer – include one in which a man-made, oven-roasted miniature chicken begins haemorrhaging blood and involuntarily moving its legs up and down after Henry sticks a fork in it in preparation for carving; and another in which a tiny worm-like creature left for Henry as an anonymous gift begins performing and doing backflips for its bemused owner.[3] In the literature on *Eraserhead*, one of the main areas of interest has been the manufacturing of the baby – is it a puppet, a mechanical prop, an animal foetus perhaps?[4] Lynch's staunch refusal to reveal the

answer on the grounds that 'magicians keep their secrets to themselves' (Lynch in Rodley 1997: 78) has only served to stoke people's curiosity. To date, however, insufficient attention has been paid to the film's *other* special-effects feats (such as the two just mentioned), feats which operate so as to disrupt narrative continuity by encouraging viewers to marvel at their life-likeness while simultaneously acknowledging their impossibility. As Buñuel said of his collaboration with Salvador Dali on *Un Chien Andalou*: 'Our only rule was very simple: no idea or image that might lend itself to rational explanation of any kind was to be accepted.'[5]

Second, at numerous points during *Eraserhead*, Henry – and along with him, the audience – is confronted by what appears, at least at first, to be unmotivated behaviour on the part of other characters in the film. Such behaviour is manifested frequently during Henry's brief yet somehow interminable dinner at the family home of his girlfriend, Mary X (Charlotte Stewart). First comes a succession of tics and spasms on Mary's part, which only subsides after her mother holds her face and runs a brush firmly through her hair. During dinner, as the mini-chicken described above begins spewing its bloody contents onto Henry's plate, Mary's mother falls victim to a quasi-epileptic fit of her own. Later, the woman begins kissing her soon-to-be son-in-law's neck in a vaguely incestuous gesture reminiscent of a similarly disturbing scene (involving a father and his adolescent daughter) in David Cronenberg's 1975 cult horror film, *Shivers*. Such episodes of bizarre, irrational behaviour can be found in almost all of Lynch's films, including even the so-called *The Straight Story* (1999), and might reasonably be labelled one of his directorial signatures.[6] But it should be kept in mind that the 'associational' component here – because the activity in question gets placed within a pre-existing narrative context, viewers are encouraged to look for some connection – has always been a favoured strategy of experimental and avant-garde film-makers, and betrays Lynch's debt to these established traditions.[7] Lynch exhibits his mastery of this strategy during the scene in which Mary prepares to leave Henry's apartment due to lack of sleep and an inability to keep the baby quiet ('You're on vacation now; you can take care of him for a little while!' she sobs). Before exiting through the front door, Mary walks back to the bed still occupied by Henry, crouches down and starts violently shaking the frame. The disquieting effect this seemingly unmotivated behaviour has on both Henry and the audience evaporates once it is revealed that she has simply been struggling to pull her suitcase out from under the bed.

Finally, throughout *Eraserhead*, the audience is confronted with excessive, hyperbolic 'gross-out' shots: typically extreme close-ups (many of them inserts) which effectively force viewers to contemplate the opening up, leakage and/or utter decay of various bodies, human as well as non-human. I shall have reason to return to this technique later on, since it stands as one of *Eraserhead*'s prime means of generating horror and disgust; for present purposes, one example should suffice. After Henry's baby gets sick approximately two-thirds of the way through the picture, the viewer is suddenly 'treated' to an extreme close-up of its diseased face, complete with leprous growths, rolled-back eyes and a mouth completely rotted on the inside.[8] Kaleta writes that '*Eraserhead* poses a quantitative imagery question. And it is character-

istically a question of excess. Who would have thought that a world could have so many bodily fluids in it' (Kaleta 1993: 22). This is right, as far as it goes. But it is not simply the *quantity* of images, bodily fluids in particular, that raises questions of excess and functions to interrupt the film's narrative flow, but the *proximity* such images have to the audience; that is, the way Lynch shoves them in our face.

The above three methods – surrealistic set-pieces, apparently unmotivated behaviour and hyperbolic gross-out shots – are by no means the only ones Lynch employs in order to render narrative continuity subservient to visual and auditory material. Additionally, I would briefly draw attention to the presence of unexpected and/or unnerving sounds – puppies suckling their mother in the middle of the X family's living room, for example, and the roaring hiss of Henry's radiator – which engender feelings of dread when such a response would not have been otherwise called for. And then there is the quick cutting to shots (not necessarily close-ups) of objects and events neither predictable nor obviously relevant if one considers the context – a sort of cinematographic equivalent to the second method discussed above. With all this in mind, I shall now proceed with an analysis of some of *Eraserhead*'s most disturbing/horrifying scenes and sequences; my goal here will be to identify those formal and thematic techniques relied upon by Lynch in order to produce such negative (upsetting, unpleasant, undesirable) emotional responses in viewers. I intend to demonstrate that many of these techniques find their origins in horror films of a far more generic nature. The conclusions reached in this next section will, among other things, lay the groundwork for my eventual discussion and critique of *Eraserhead*'s supposedly 'redemptive' moments.

Eraserhead's Horror Effects

The following are brief descriptions of five of *Eraserhead*'s most unnerving scenes, in order of their appearance within the film. Although there is a degree of arbitrariness in the selections – there are, without a doubt, *other* unnerving moments, and perhaps not *everyone* will find those listed here especially effective or interesting – most of the scenes in question have been deemed worthy of attention in the critical literature on *Eraserhead*. After describing these scenes, I shall proceed to compare, contrast and analyse them in greater detail, and in the process situate them within various already-existent horror traditions:

(a) Early in the film, and after an innocent-enough walk home, Henry enters his apartment building and presses the elevator button. What follows after the doors open is an extremely disconcerting period of waiting (approximately 13 seconds) for them to close again, and then an equally disconcerting ride up to Henry's floor. It is not so much that anything 'happens' during this sequence – though the lights in the elevator flicker, and briefly go out a couple of times – but our sense of foreboding is primed nevertheless, and carries over to subsequent scenes.

(b) While alone at the table with Mary's father Bill (Allen Joseph) during his dinner at the Xs', Henry sits uncomfortably for what seems like an eternity while Bill just stares at him, his body completely still, his face frozen in the mask of a goofy

smile. At the same time, in an effectively eerie juxtaposition of contrasting moods, Mary can be seen crying in the background.

(c) Henry and the audience suddenly discover (in the scene discussed briefly above) that the baby – already malformed and not entirely human – is sick, and not just sick, but suffering terribly.

(d) In the midst of a fantasy sequence that we eventually discover is a dream (or rather, a nightmare), Henry climbs up onto the stage inside his radiator and attempts to make physical contact with the blonde, ovarian-cheeked 'Lady in the Radiator' (Laurel Near) who occasionally performs a song-and-dance routine there for him. His attempt at touching her fails, however, and The Lady disappears in a flash of blinding white light. Henry backs up slowly as a small tree on a dolly rolls to centre stage. Then, just before the tree begins oozing blood down its sides, our hero's head literally pops off, only to be replaced by that of his mutant child's.

(e) Just prior to the film's epilogue, Henry takes a pair of scissors and cautiously yet determinedly cuts open the bandages in which his paraplegic infant has been mummified for what we can only assume has been its entire life. What gets revealed to Henry and the audience is far more disgusting than anyone could have guessed, far more than anyone could have imagined. After an extreme close-up of the baby's now exposed internal organs, out from every orifice mushrooms a foamy waste material that threatens to remain in a state of perpetual and ever-increasing discharge. (Kaleta's remark, quoted above, concerning the 'quantitative imagery' of *Eraserhead* is most appropriate here.)

One obvious difference between the first two scenes on this list is that the former involves just Henry and an inanimate object (the elevator), while the latter centres on a bizarre interaction taking place between two people, neither of whom we would be inclined to call 'normal', but one of whom – Henry – serves as our surrogate for much of the picture. Nevertheless, it could plausibly be argued that these scenes engender their disturbing effects primarily the same way: not through special effects, manipulative camerawork or hyperbolic gross-out shots, but through images which instil in viewers a palpable feeling of uncanniness.[9] Before I defend it, this claim requires both qualification and clarification: the Lynchian uncanny is not – at least not primarily – explicable in Freudian/psychoanalytic terms (that is, via a return to consciousness of some previously repressed ideational content, or else via a reconfirmation in depicted reality of some previously 'surmounted' belief or beliefs), so much as in the terms proffered by Noël Carroll, a contemporary philosopher of film who attributes feelings of horror and uncanniness to apparent transgressions or violations of existing cultural (in some cases, conceptual) categories. Examples of such categories, according to Carroll, are the mutually exclusive dyads 'me/not me, inside/outside … living/dead' and human/machine (Carroll 1990: 32).[10]

In both (a) and (b), Henry waits and waits … and waits … for something to happen (the elevator door to close; Bill X to stop grinning), without actively seeking to change his situation. In part, this is a symptom of his passivity, a character defect which is at least partially responsible for the problems he faces at home, and one which is dramatically overcome – with tragic consequences – when he finally

decides to undress/murder his own child. But it is also no real surprise, since Henry has every reason (every *right*) to expect the 'somethings' in question to change of their own accord, and in a timely manner. It is precisely because Lynch intentionally primes, only to violate, Henry's – as well as our own – expectations concerning what is and is not 'appropriate' (standard operating procedure for a familiar piece of machinery; normal human social behaviour) that most viewers experience a feeling of uncanniness upon watching these scenes. At the imagistic level, both (a) and (b) also exhibit a *second* level of uncanniness: for there is a sense in which, arguably, the elevator displays a primitive consciousness of sorts, intentionally and perhaps spitefully 'teasing' Henry; and Bill X, by sitting utterly motionless for so long, in addition manages to violate the cultural/conceptual schema distinguishing animate from inanimate bodies. (Apparently this is a trait that runs in the X family, as Mary's grandmother displays some extreme corpse-like symptoms of her own.)

Without for a moment wishing to deny the effectiveness and creativity of the scenes in question, it should be pointed out that, at the level of *types* rather than *tokens*, the uncanny images just described do not originate with *Eraserhead*. On the contrary, the transgressive trope of non-living objects exhibiting some degree of proto-consciousness is a central feature of most – if not all – haunted-house movies (consider, for example, *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1964), *The Legend of Hell House* (John Hough, 1973) and *The Changeling* (Peter Medak, 1980)). Michel Chion writes that the shots of Henry waiting for the elevator and confronting evil in the form of electrical failures once inside it, 'betray the successfully assimilated influence of Kubrick, Fellini … and, of course, Tati' (Chion 1995: 31). With respect to Kubrick, it is true that his *own* unforgettable elevator sequence, in *The Shining*, appeared three years *after* Lynch's.[11] Similarly, confusion over the ontological status of a particular individual – *Is s/he awake or asleep, conscious or unconscious, alive or dead?* – can be found in such a diverse collection of horror film narratives as *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (Michael Curtiz, 1933), *I Walked With a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *House of Wax* (André De Toth, 1953), *A Bucket of Blood* (Roger Corman, 1959) and the post-*Eraserhead* pictures *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (Tobe Hooper, 1986), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Wes Craven, 1988) and *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995). In the last example, a motionless, emaciated male figure is discovered tied to his bed in a dilapidated apartment by Detectives Somerset (Morgan Freeman) and Mills (Brad Pitt). Considering the wretched state of the body, and the largely 'realistic' world in which *Se7en* takes place, there seems no way this person could be alive. Curiosity and comfort lead the partners to bend over and examine the man, who suddenly jolts into consciousness with a vitality that fills most audience members with equal parts terror and disgust. Here we are approaching that most prolific of horror sub-genres, the zombie film, where the non-existent boundary separating animate from inanimate matter is frequently expressed by the term 'undead'. In Bill X's case, and especially that of Grandma X, however, a more fitting expression would be 'unliving'.

The point to take from this discussion is that Lynch's genius, as evidenced throughout *Eraserhead* in such simple yet compelling scenes as (a) and (b) above,

should not automatically be taken as an indication of utter novelty and nonconformity with respect to established codes of cinematic discourse, even *generic* codes, despite the director's own denials of influence (which may or may not be true, the question of Lynch's conscious or direct influences making next to no difference to the soundness of the claim). Rather, one of the most important (yet to date, least popular) tasks of the Lynch scholar should be the systematic investigation and illumination of those *continuities* between his film work and the various texts and conventions – both classic and modern, local and foreign – to which this work is indebted.[12] For it is only by *contextualising* a film such as *Eraserhead* that we may fully appreciate the extent to which Lynch displays not just originality and creativity, but an awareness of existing traditions, and an expertise in the technical production of uncanny effects.[13]

In order to further support these assertions, I propose to look more closely at another pair of scenes from the list above: (c) and (e). Because both scenes centre on Henry's freakish, physically- (not to mention psychologically-) indeterminate infant, it is no surprise that the predominant emotional response generated in each of them is disgust. Nor is the stylistic means by which Lynch seeks to achieve this response surprising, namely through the use of what I have been referring to as 'hyperbolic gross-out shots' (of the baby's face in the first instance; of its body in the second). A staple of modern horror fare, the technique of quick cutting to extreme close-ups of disturbing content became the defining feature of low-budget 'splatter' films, as pioneered by underground auteur Herschell Gordon Lewis (*Blood Feast*, 1963; *Color Me Blood Red*, 1965) and popularised in such immediate *Eraserhead* predecessors as Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* (1972) – in which an innocent young girl is stabbed to death and disembowelled by her sadistic tormentors – and Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974).[14] But considering that, in Lynch's film, the focus is primarily on the 'guts' component of the splatter sub-genre's 'blood-and-guts' formula, it would be remiss not to mention *Eraserhead*'s similarity in this respect to a pair of modern Italian horror classics: *Black Sunday* (Mario Bava, 1960) and *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977).

In *Black Sunday*, there is an unprecedented and thus truly shocking moment near the end of the film in which the viewer is presented with a close-up of the reincarnated vampire-witch Aja's (Barbara Steele) rotting innards, which had previously been kept hidden by a mere article of clothing – just as the makeshift bandages encasing the Spencer baby's limbless body are the only things keeping its viscera 'under wraps'. Where are the layers of epidermis to protect this otherwise helpless being, to ensure that its insides *remain* inside? Although, as Freeland notes, nowhere in the published interviews does Lynch make actual direct reference to *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965), J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum must be onto something when they describe the baby as 'an illegitimate monster – a mewling, eye-rolling first cousin to the skinned-rabbit centrepiece of Roman Polanski's [film]' (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983: 214). Whatever sympathy some viewers may feel for this creature – and let me emphasise the word *may* here, not wishing to assume any uniformity of audience response on this point – the 'monster' appella-

tion is fitting. By fashioning Henry's baby skinless, boneless and poised to spill its guts out all over the place, Lynch forces Daddy and audience alike to contemplate a living, breathing (temporarily, at least) transgression of the deeply-entrenched cultural opposition, inside vs. outside.

Carroll writes that '[monsters] are un-natural relative to a culture's conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. … [T]hey tend to render those who encounter them insane, mad, deranged, and so on' (Carroll 1990: 34). This last is certainly a point to which Henry could testify, despite the utter lack of danger represented by his newborn; after all, with no arms or legs, how on earth – besides its incessant, exasperating crying – could it possibly harm him? In fact, the interactions between Henry and the baby, culminating in Henry's extra-uterine abortion of the baby (there *is* something distinctly surgical about the scene in question, what with the baby wrapped in bandages and Henry methodically snipping his way through them), leads me to propose a slight modification of the standard Carrollian view: monsters may be physically *or* cognitively threatening to those who encounter them – either type of threat is sufficient, neither by itself is necessary. For the sake of comparison, it is worth quoting here the mad, overanxious narrator of Edgar Allen Poe's 1843 short story, *The Tell-Tale Heart*:

> The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. … It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain: but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. … I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. … I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – a pale, blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever (Poe 1980: 186).

Although his own monomania – *What lies underneath those bandages?* – only reveals itself towards the end of *Eraserhead*'s narrative, Henry's striking resemblance to the Poe narrator should be obvious: both men possess excessively keen senses and what can only be considered hyperactive imaginations; neither has anything to fear, physically-speaking, from his eventual victim; both are spurred to violence by characteristics and qualities that challenge their traditional way of looking at, and so understanding, the worlds in which they live; and both wind up paying (more or less intentionally) a heavy price for the murders they commit.

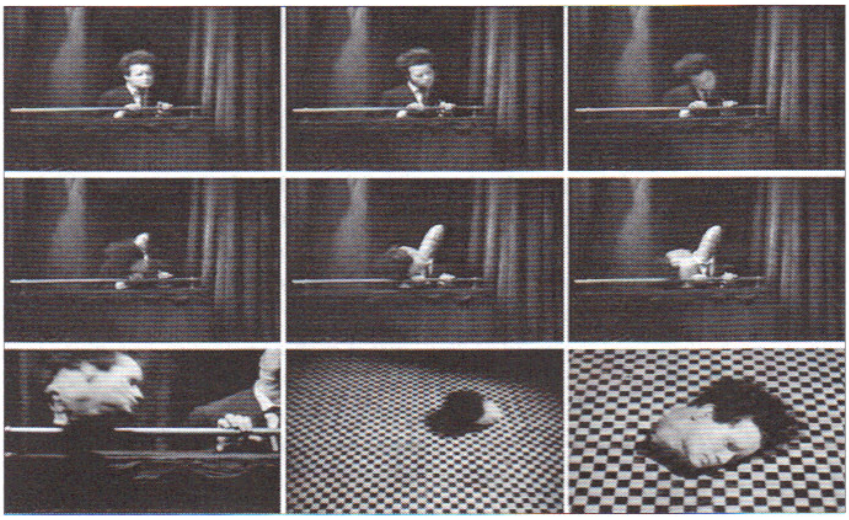
With respect to (c), the sudden close-up of the baby in the throes of its mysterious, ulcerous illness finds an analogue in *Suspiria*, Argento's masterpiece of supernatural horror, released in the same year as *Eraserhead*. In this film, the discovery of infestation in the ceiling of a famous dance academy leads to a quick zoom-in to a nest of maggots, followed immediately by a close-up of a young girl's face covered

with the vile insects – the resultant image is surprisingly similar to what we see of Henry's infant. Also crucial here is the sudden introduction of a high-pitched, monotonic, non-diegetic sound, an effect which serves as an aural correlate to the unsettling visuals. Lynch employs precisely the same technique in (c) – as well as in the scene when Henry discovers a multitude of stringy, sperm-like creatures (foetuses?) under the covers of his bed[15] – resulting in nearly exactly the same bi-sensory shock effect.

Finally, we come to (d), a scene that stands alone in this brief survey not least because of its fantastic/surrealistic atmosphere and images. As is so often the case with highly effective horror scenes, even *knowing* what to expect here fails to provide a shield against its disturbing impact.[16] In order to examine the reasons for (the 'causes of') this impact, I shall divide (d) into the following three segments: Henry's brief encounter with The Lady in the Radiator; his behaviour as the tree rolls out onto the radiator stage; and the loss and subsequent replacement of his head. What emerges from this division is that each sequence possesses its *own* horror effects, effects which nevertheless work together to add to the overall power of the scene, and which, after they are identified, serve to render the scene as a whole somewhat less mysterious (though certainly no less frightening).

In the first of the above segments, Henry approaches The Lady in the Radiator, whose chipmunk cheeks, adorable smile and saccharine voice still betray something distinctly ominous (I shall return to this point below). With a look of desperation mixed with apprehension on his face, he reaches out to touch her, but at the moment of contact the screen goes blindingly white and the omnipresent 'white noise' of mechanistic energy suddenly rises to a near-deafening crescendo (once again we are provided the auditory correlate to a striking visual display). Henry pulls back in surprise and, perhaps wanting to verify the strange cause-and-effect process he has seemingly initiated, tries touching her again – with the same result. Except that this time, after turning away momentarily, what he (and we) see in place of The Lady is the hideous visage of The Man in the Planet. This unexpected switch functions as a very effective scare tactic, as an associative link is established between apparent opposites (good and evil, appealing and repulsive, etc.) and what was originally thought to be safe is now revealed as a threat.[17] Lynch would repeat himself 15 years later in the underrated *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992) when the face of Laura Palmer's (Sheryl Lee) demonic attacker is momentarily replaced by that of her own father. But this tactic has a long history and can be found in numerous vampire, shape-shifter and *doppelgänger* films, as well as in such otherwise non-generic horror fare as *Don't Look Now* (Nicholas Roeg, 1973) and, more recently, *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990).[18]

In the second sequence from (d), Henry, even more unnerved after the shock of what just happened, slowly backs away from the centre of the stage, finally standing behind a railing as the tree makes its special guest appearance. Crucial to notice here (but next to invisible if one is not looking for it) is the compulsive manner in which Henry twists his hands around the rail, reminiscent of the fits experienced by Mary and her mother at the X family home, like a needle stuck in the groove of a phonograph record. Whether consciously registered by the viewer or not, Henry's



Henry loses his head in *Eraserhead*

repetitive, masturbatory hand motion only increases the overall feeling of dread and fearsome anticipation.

And we are not disappointed. For in the scene's final segment, Henry's head suddenly pops off, or, to be more precise, is forced off its moorings by an erect phallus erupting from somewhere inside his body. This shocking sight is accompanied by a loud noise reminiscent of a cartoon spring being released from a broken jack-in-the-box. His hands continue their circular movements around the railing, even though Henry is, at least for the time being, dead; think of a chicken with its head cut off, still running frantically around the pen until its body finally gets the message. Henry's decapitation is so horrific in part because of the way it happens. We have no time to prepare ourselves as the executioner readies his sword, the killer wields his knife, etc.; rather, it happens pretty much all on its own, via some kind of internal mechanism, and if Henry can lose his head so easily, what does that say about the rest of him … and us? I have made it this far without resorting to hackneyed Freudianisms, but the castration anxiety manifested in this sequence is just too transparent – and too effective – not to mention. The slow, steady rise of the baby's (penis) head in place of Henry's own signals Oedipal wish-fulfilment and in fact serves to over-determine psychoanalytic interpretation: are we witnessing Henry's nightmare, the baby's fantasy, both at once? Ultimately, the horror of this sequence is the horror of *attack from within*, whether psychically, socially ('As the internalisation of social labels, this interior "baby" is an impediment to the fulfillment Henry seeks' (Nochimson 1997: 160)), or at a more primitive, bodily level. In this respect, it bears comparison with such *Eraserhead* contemporaries as *Shivers* (aka *They Came From Within*) (David Cronenberg, 1975), *The Manitou* (William Girdler, 1978), *The Beast Within* (Philippe Mora, 1982) and, of course, *Alien* (Ridley Scott,

1979), with its infamous male birthing scene of an extra-terrestrial infant, a close cousin to Henry's own.

The Essential Evil in/of Eraserhead

The two-part thesis of this essay has been, first, that rather than treating *Eraserhead* as an isolated masterpiece, one whose 'genuine strangeness [of] cinematography … is not easy to define and cannot be reduced to the use of particular techniques' (Chion 1995: 42), the film's pervasive uncanniness is most fruitfully explained, though never explained away, when situated within the context of the horror genre and its established traditions; and second, that if such a reading of *Eraserhead* is at odds with Lynch's own denials of influence, so much the worse for the director (but not at all for the film itself). In support of these claims, I have analysed a number of *Eraserhead*'s most disturbing scenes, seeking to reveal and partially expose their dependence on and interaction with particular currents in horror film-making past and present.

As alluded to above, even the film's purported oases of contentment have a dark and ominous feel to them. Consider The Lady in the Radiator – whom Nochimson claims 'represents a feminine energy that prohibits castration' (Nochimson 1997: 164) and of whom Lynch disingenuously states that 'inside is where the happiness in her comes from. Her outside appearance is not the thing' (Lynch in Rodley 1997: 67) – what with her seductive song promoting suicide ('In heaven, everything is fine…'), her ritualised acts of violence (stomping to death the falling foetuses as part of a formal dance routine) and her funhouse-mirror Marilyn Monroe looks (those chubby cheeks are less cute than regressive, even grotesque). Similarly, Henry's night of passion with the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall possesses its share of distressing elements: for he must forcibly prevent the woman from focusing on the hysterical baby, who is indeed stuck witnessing a variant of the primal scene; and the couple's potentially 'romantic' dissolution into a pool of milky water closes with a disconcerting image of the woman's hair floating on the surface (what happened to *Henry's* famous coiffure? and is there any doubt that the woman's hair has become unattached from her scalp?). Although Freeland views Henry's infanticide as 'a matter less of revenge than of consuming curiosity or even mercy' (Freeland 2000: 230), we have already seen (with reference to Poe) that it is Henry's very obsession with 'ridding himself' of that which he is responsible for but cannot comprehend that renders his act of murder less merciful than (mono)maniacal.

There can be no denying the fact that *Eraserhead* is a complex and challenging film. The extent to which Lynch here renders plot and narrative subservient to what we have called 'the primacy of the audio-visual image' has been amply demonstrated. But it is an overstatement to claim that 'the uncanny in *Eraserhead* is what literally exceeds the limits of representation' (Freeland 2000: 234), or that 'all structures of representation … in *Eraserhead* … always feign totality in their absurd incompleteness' (Nochimson 1997: 158). The brilliance of this film lies in the director's extraordinary command of proven horror techniques: in *Eraserhead*, it is precisely what *can*

be represented (despite its impossibility) that generates such powerful feelings of uncanniness, anxiety and disgust.[19]

Notes

1 'I never saw, I still haven't seen a lot of Buñuel', Lynch told a *Rolling Stone* interviewer in 1990. 'I saw *An Andalusian Dog* a lot later. I don't even know that much about surrealism – I guess it's just my take on what's floating by' (Lynch in Breskin 1990: 62; cf. Chion 1995: 25). It is true that Lynch screened Billy Wilder's creepy *film noir*, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), for his actors and crew before starting shooting on *Eraserhead*, but he has since downplayed even the influence of this film: 'there wasn't anything in particular about it that related to *Eraserhead*. It was just a black-and-white experience of a certain mood' (Lynch in Rodley 1997: 71). Moments later, however, Lynch qualifies this remark: 'Obviously, there's gotta be something similar because I love it so much. But I don't know what it is' (ibid.).

2 Cf. Freeland: 'the plot [of *Eraserhead*] is straightforward in its own odd way' (2000: 226). Martha Nochimson offers an interesting contrast to this position when she states that 'the end of *Eraserhead* represents the two incommensurable regimes of energy and structure together, never to be harmonised but sometimes in a blinding flash to be balanced. *We have narrative closure, but only as a result of having broken free from narrative structure*' (Nochimson 1997: 162 [my emphasis].

3 See, in particular, Švankmajer's *The Last Trick* (1964), *Jabberwocky* (1971) and *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982). For an introduction to the work of Jan Švankmajer, see Uhde 2003.

4 See, for example, Godwin 1984: 48, Freeland 2000: 229, and Hoberman and Rosenbaum, who argue that 'the taboo aspect of this question [whether the baby can be defined as a living creature] is, in fact, central to the film's impact' (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983: 242).

5 Interview with Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou*. Interama Video Classics, 1990.

6 Tico Romao, in e-mail correspondence with the author (1 December 2001), makes the point that it is productive to situate Alvin Straight's (Richard Farnsworth) characterisation in *The Straight Story* with respect to the ways in which Lynch routinely departs from mainstream character depiction: 'While … Straight does not provoke the category confusion of, say, the "baby" in *Eraserhead*, nor does he manifest the psycho-sexual pathologies that are exhibited in certain characters of *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, he nonetheless uses a lawnmower as his principal mode of transport and eats raw wieners along the way!'

7 See the essays in Mendik and Schneider 2002.

8 The baby's desperate gasps for breath are also amplified for the duration of this shot.

9 The word 'uncanny' comes from the German 'unheimlich' (literally 'unhomely'), a fact which has special relevance here considering the domestic locales in which the scenes in question take place.

10 The classic statement of Freud's position on the uncanny can be found in Freud (1919/58). For more on the relevance of this account to horror film theorising, see Schneider (1997). For Carroll's non-psychoanalytic alternative, see Carroll 1990: 31–5. For discussion and critique of the Carrollian view, see Schneider 2000.

11 See also Dick Maas's Dutch horror film, *De Lift* (1983), remade in Hollywood in 2001 under the title *Down*. Freeland writes that '*The Shining* and *Eraserhead* share a number of features. Each is the story of a father threatened by an uncanny or monstrous child. Because he attempts to destroy this child, the father himself must die. Conditions surrounding this family melodrama make father and child seem as much victims as they are monsters. [...] The evil that dominates the worldview of these films is not just a product of literary elements; its evocation fundamentally involves the filmic medium as a whole' (Freeland 2000: 215–16).

12 Note that I have not restricted myself in this sentence to mention of *filmic* texts and conventions, thus leaving open the possibility (and possible utility) of cross-media analyses.

13 Had this way of conceiving of Lynch and his work gained credence earlier, it may not have come as such a surprise – even shock – to find the director so successful at making the seeming transition to 'mainstream' Hollywood narrative in *The Straight Story*, questions concerning the status of *Mulholland Drive* notwithstanding.

14 Though retrospectively taken to task by Chion, Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *et al.*, perhaps the contemporary review of *Eraserhead* which appeared in *Variety* (23 March 1977) was not *entirely* off-target when it stated that 'Lynch seems bent on emulating Herschell Gordon Lewis, the king of low-budget gore'.

15 As reported by Godwin, 'these "foetuses" were actually human umbilical cords, which Catherine Coulson obtained from a hospital' (Godwin 1984: 64).

16 The very interesting question that arises here is whether knowing what to expect in such scenes actually *increases* their disturbing impact (and if so, why?).

17 Contrast this analysis with that of Nochimson, who writes that 'In a series of images after Henry reaches for the lady, we see the man in the planet as an internal pressure on Henry to lose the vision of the lady, leaving empty space where she had been' (Nochimson 1997: 159). Perhaps a threatening space, but by no means is it empty.

18 For an extended discussion of the *doppelgänger* trope in modern horror cinema, see Schneider 2001.

19 Sincere thanks to Annette Davison, Peter Krämer, Tico Romao and Erica Sheen for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this essay.